



SEATTLE CITY COUNCIL | DISTRICT 3

COUNCILMEMBER KSHAMA SAWANT

February 27, 2021

David Danner, Chairman, Washington State Utilities and Transportation Commission (UTC)

Ann Rendahl, UTC Commissioner

Jay Balasbas, UTC Commissioner

Mark Johnson, UTC Executive Director/ Secretary

PO Box 47250

Olympia, WA 98504-7250

Members of the UTC Commission and Executive:

On behalf of Seattle and District 3 community members and working people, I am writing to demand that the Washington State Utilities and Transportation Commission use its authority to undertake an immediate, full, and comprehensive investigation into risks of future leaks, fires, and explosions involving Puget Sound Energy's (PSE) gas pipelines in our city.

I urge Seattle Mayor Durkan and all City Council members to join me in this call for a full investigation of PSE's gas pipelines and the company's maintenance and safety programs.

Last Wednesday, February 24, the lives of thousands of residents and workers in Seattle's Central District were disrupted because of a dangerous underground gas leak and fire, involving pipes controlled by the for-profit PSE.

But for the rapid and expert work of the union workers at the Seattle Fire Department (Firefighters Local 27) and PSE (Electrical Workers Local 77), who put themselves in harm's way when they responded to this dangerous situation, stopping the leaking gas and extinguishing the fire, we might have seen a catastrophic disaster in our city.

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The gas fire shows yet again the risks and damage that for-profit energy companies unilaterally impose on our communities, and the risks of continued reliance on climate-harming fossil fuels.

Puget Sound Energy, owned by a group of investors including the Alberta Investment Management Corporation, seems to care more about financial returns for their shareholders than they do for the safety and security of our community.

The Central District gas fire was unfortunately not an isolated incident. In 2016, an explosion in PSE's gas lines leveled a City block in Greenwood, injuring nine firefighters, destroying three small businesses, and damaging dozens of buildings. Your investigation at the time determined that PSE had failed to retire an old section of gas piping, leading to the explosion, and you [fined PSE \\$1.5 million for this neglect](#).

Given this history, it's not surprising that Seattle's Central District residents, and indeed residents throughout the region, have been reaching out to my office with deep concerns about PSE's reliability. Their anxiety about PSE is entirely justified.

One worker wrote to me describing the potentially dangerous situation with PSE's pipes:

"For over 5 years, I have worked for companies that locate PSE's underground facilities in Washington state for construction and excavation. The mapping system for the power and gas facilities hasn't been updated for over a year, and there are several facilities that are mis-mapped, as well as numerous areas where gas services and mains are faulty and unlocatable.

Given all this, I'm not surprised by [Wednesday's] gas leak and am grateful that no one was hurt. Due to faulty infrastructure, I expect such issues as seen in [Wednesday's] leak are likely to happen again with more frequency.

I personally look forward to the natural gas systems to be safely deactivated so that the region can move towards cleaner, more efficient renewable energy sources. The sooner the better, and safer for all of us.”

The Washington State Utilities and Transportation Commission was established more than a century ago to ensure public services and safety, and to provide a bulwark against private profiteering companies. Indeed, [as the UTC’s own webpage notes, it grew out of the progressive movement’s demand to reign in the power of railroad monopolies](#). Today, as with a century ago, we have private companies that are putting profit before safety and the public’s well-being. The Commission has an affirmative duty to act, before there are more gas fires or explosions.

As [the UTC’s own mission statement](#) asserts, “Our Mission is to protect the people of Washington by ensuring that investor-owned utility and transportation services are safe, available, reliable and fairly priced.”

Specifically, I call on the UTC to urgently investigate:

- The age and status of PSE’s entire gas piping and infrastructure system, and the risks of future leaks, fires, and explosions.
- Whether PSE has at any point neglected maintenance, monitoring, and safety programs, exposing the public to risk.
- Whether PSE has short-staffed maintenance, monitoring, and safety programs, making it difficult or impossible for workers to do their jobs safely and properly.
- The economic, safety, and environmental risk to the region of continued reliance on PSE gas instead of converting to clean renewable energies.

Seattle’s working people and community members have a right to be protected from dangerous incidents like the Greenwood explosion and now the Central District fire, and it is your responsibility, as representatives of the people of Washington, to swiftly act.

In closing, I note that Seattle's electricity is run by a public utility, and in fact run far better, for the benefit of all residents and not for global profit-seeking investors. I believe this latest PSE gas accident demonstrates once again that we need to take the big energy companies like PSE into democratic public ownership, so that working people can have a say over the impacts they have on our communities and the climate, and can reorient these companies away from fracked gas and toward clean, renewable energies.

In the context of this latest accident, the UTC must immediately and aggressively exercise its full authority to protect the public. The residents of Seattle expect nothing less.

Sincerely,



Councilmember Kshama Sawant
Seattle District 3

cc:

Seattle Mayor Jenny Durkan
Seattle City Councilmembers